

Promoting Women's Participation in Kenya's Governance



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Mike Crawley

[Photo: In Kenya, women lack political power but play a major role in agriculture — the country's largest economic sector.]

On the brightly coloured poster, a woman wearing the traditional Kenyan village attire of a kerchief, a wrap-around skirt, and cotton blouse is doing something untraditional: using a computer. The poster reads in Kiswahili, the national language: 'Be educated through computers.'

This poster is a humble but significant step in a research project that aims to help rural Kenyan women increase their participation in the democratic process. The project, which involves two districts — Makueni, in Eastern Province and Kakamega in Western Province — will eventually see up to 30,000 women learn how to access information via computers.

Civic education

But this initiative is not just about teaching village women how to surf the Internet. Civic education is the key goal. "Because Kenyan women are poor, they get manipulated during voting," explains Professor [Shanyisa Khasiani](#), Executive Director of the Nairobi-based Family Support Institute, which is implementing the project with funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

Professor Khasiani says women's lack of power is unjust because they help bring in badly needed foreign exchange earnings through their labour, and play a major role in agriculture — Kenya's largest economic sector. "Kenyan women are contributing significantly to the economy and the development of this country but they do not have access to key resources," she stresses.

Marginalized

Women are marginalized at all levels of Kenyan society. Thirty percent of Kenyan women are illiterate, compared with 14% of men. Women make up just 23% of the judiciary and the civil service. Even in agriculture, just one in five extension workers — employed by the government to tell farmers about new seeds, crop rotation, and appropriate agricultural practices — are women.

The biggest gender gap is in parliament: less than 3% of the country's elected politicians are women. In contrast, neighbouring Uganda has reserved one parliamentary seat from each of its 45 districts for women. In Kenya, only one woman has ever served as a cabinet minister.

National elections

Multi-party national elections are relatively new to Kenya: only two have been held since independence — in 1992 and 1997. But by the time of the next election in 2002, the women of Makueni and Kakamega will have a much better idea of what voting is about.

Professor Khasiani says the concept of civic education is greeted with some skepticism in Kenya as it has generally been equated with party rallies. Her agency explained the project's intentions to the Kenyan government and local administrators, and received the go-ahead. "It was important for us to have the government on our side, otherwise we would have been wasting effort."

Rural communities

According to Professor Khasiani, the participating communities were chosen for their similarities as well as their differences. Both Makueni and Kakamega are poor, rural areas, but their cultures and types of farming are distinct. Makueni is a dry area, where villagers primarily rely on livestock, while Kakamega is in one of Kenya's most fertile agricultural zones.

Rural women's groups provided the project's entry points into these communities. These groups — comprised of 20 to 30 women — exist to provide support to members. They collect dues for distribution to individual women in time of need, to pay for such things as funeral expenses or house building.

Community needs

In December 1998, the project team asked a sampling of women's group leaders to identify the civic education needs of their communities. These women were later brought to Nairobi along with local chiefs for a stakeholders meeting, which provided the first chance for representatives of both communities to meet. Afterwards, the group leaders began developing civic education materials. They chose posters as the best medium because of the semi-literate nature of their communities. The women identified 10 issues of concern, and those issues dictated the design of the posters.

Professor Khasiani says her team thought that political representation would be the main issue, but other concerns emerged, which are now reflected in the posters. One poster reads in Kiswahili: 'Vita nyumbani bado ni vita' ('Violence at home is still violence'). It shows a man with one hand on a woman's throat and the other brandishing a lash.

Posters

The leaders felt that transportation should be addressed, so another poster states: 'Roads are good, they bring development.' A third poster shows rural women in a bank manager's office, with the caption: 'Give credit to women to promote development.'

To link these issues explicitly with the democratic process, every poster includes in red letters the slogan: 'Elimika Kisiasa!' ('Be educated in politics!'). The message is that women should vote wisely based on issues that matter to them.

Next phase

The next phase of the project is to "train the trainers" — the women's group leaders — in computer skills. They can then pass their skills to village women, while the posters are being distributed. To facilitate these steps, each community will have a resource centre equipped with two computers and civic education reference materials.

Professor Khasiani believes that teaching these women computer skills will have multiple impacts. First, they will be able to communicate with one another, exchange ideas, and even learn what other NGO's are doing about women's empowerment. They will also be able to use technology to improve their economic status. For example, some women who produce handicrafts could find markets via the Internet. And perhaps most importantly, the simple act of learning to use the computer will empower the women psychologically — proving to themselves that a village woman using a computer is more than just an image on a poster.

Mike Crawley is a Canadian journalist working for Gemini News Service on a fellowship funded by IDRC. (Photo: P. Bennett, IDRC)

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Resource Person:

Dr Shanyisa Khasiani, Executive Director, Family Support Institute, PO Box 30913, Nairobi, Kenya; Tel: (25-42) 226-350; Fax: (25-42) 247-412; E-mail: fasi@africaonline.co.ke

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